Venturing into the House of Digital Horrors: A Review of *The World of Scary Video Games*

by Daniel Vella

It would be difficult to think of a more fitting scholar than Bernard Perron to undertake the task of writing a definitive volume on horror video games. He has published numerous papers on the subject, written a monograph on the *Silent Hill* series of survival horror games (2012) and edited a collected volume of essays on horror games (2009) that, until the present volume, had a good claim to being the most substantial academic work available on horror in games.

As such, *The World of Scary Video Games: A Study in Videoludic Horror* (2018) represents the culmination of years of work in this domain. In fact, it owes an acknowledged debt to these earlier forays, drawing upon them extensively. However, the effect is not one of repetition or redundancy, but, rather, of the gathering-together of existing ideas to serve as the starting point for a further, more ambitious excursion, deeper into the heart of horror.

Perron’s book is impressive in both scope and depth. From the shambling zombies and pointedly stilted controls of *Resident Evil* (Capcom 1997), through the psychosocial horror of *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (Fictional Games 2010) to the fraught cat-and-mouse dynamics of *Alien Isolation* (The Creative Assembly 2015), the category of horror video games is a diverse and densely populated one, but *The World of Scary Video Games* maps out the full extent of the territory in remarkable detail. It is also wide-ranging in terms of its approach. Though Perron labels himself, and the method he adopts in the book, as formalist, and the book focuses primarily on the formal properties and structures that define videoludic horror, it is much more diverse than such a label would suggest.

Across its more than four hundred pages, the horror â€” genreâ€™s in videogames â€” if such a term can be used to refer to such a wide category of games â€” is refracted through a kaleidoscopic array of lenses. It is in this sense that the book lives up to its mission statement of being â€œa compendium on videoludic horrorâ€ (133), following not one single path through the territory, but rather embarking upon a set of interlocking forays that add up to a more complex and exhaustive map than any single route could have allowed for.

It is neatly structured into three parts, addressing, respectively, the genre, history and form of horror videogames. In the four chapters making up the first part, Perron considers questions of genre, working towards an understanding of what â€œhorrorâ€ means in games, and of what constitutes a â€œscary video game.â€

As it perhaps must, in its first chapter the book begins with a consideration on the question of genre and how it is defined in videogames. In the second chapter, the book then immediately shifts into a consideration of the term â€œsurvival horror.â€ Perron provides a detailed, in-depth historical overview of the term, comprehensively tracing its usage, and its wax and wane, in both academic and popular discourses. As Perron notes, unlike the term â€œhorror game,â€ one knows with quite some precision what is entailed in a â€œsurvival horror gameâ€: cinematic camera angles that play with on- and off-screen space, unwieldy â€œtankâ€ controls, a limited supply of items and ammunition, jump scares, and so on. His diachronic analysis of the emergence and crystallization of the term, then, becomes a neat way of articulating the discursive processes and negotiations by which the boundaries of a genre take shape.

Having said that, at the end of the chapter, Perron remarks that survival horror represents only one corner of the domain of horror games, and that â€œexil is the overall system or larger territory of horror that needs to be exploredâ€ (65). That being the case, this second chapter begs the question: why, before the book has established its approach to videoludic horror in general, does it focus so narrowly upon a specific sub-category of it?

With this early shift in focus from horror games to the narrower remit of survival horror, one of the very few points of criticism that might be levelled at the book becomes apparent. Though it sets its remit much wider, survival horror appears to be very much at the focus of its more general engagement with videoludic horror. Even when a different configuration of horror is under consideration, it is never long before, by comparison or contrast, survival horror once again finds itself at the centre of the discussion.

Certainly, a strong case could be made for the positioning of survival horror as the *ne plus ultra* of videoludic horror, and Perron is never less than insightful and convincing in his arguments in this direction. It helps, of course, that Perron is on familiar territory here, and his critical perspective on survival horror is authoritative. However, this does lead to a sense of imbalance in the book â€” on occasion, the
The remaining two chapters of the first section return to a more general perspective in order to delimit the boundaries of this "larger territory." In Chapter 3, Perron’s main point, following horror theorists like Noë Carroll, Philippe Dubois and Rick Woland, is that "horror is meant to frighten" (67), and that, for this reason, the emotion of fear is key to determining the status of a given work as horror. On a solid conceptual foundation, the notion of "fear" is unpacked at some length, and tied to the situation of gameplay: in a nutshell, Perron’s argument is that the player’s positioning in the gameworld via her embodiment in the protagonist allows her to feel emotions of fear in relation to perceived threats and dangers to this in-game existence, and to respond, from this same position of embodiment, by means of "fear-motivated actions" (87).

Chapter 4, then, is core to the book’s project: here, it is Perron’s aim to lay out a systematic set of elements and notions that will help to chart the large videoludic horror territory (87). In effect, what this chapter does is to establish a taxonomy for videogames based on categorizing formal properties -- similar to foundational efforts in game studies such as Aarseth, Smedstad and Sunnanå (2003) or Elverdam and Aarseth (2007) -- in order to identify which configurations of formal properties are more likely to be found in scary videogames. This chapter -- by some measure the book’s densest -- covers a great deal of theoretical ground, proposing a lexicon of "figures of interactivity," among which, the primary ones defining videoludic horror are "deontological features," "spatial progression," and the "explanation of items," "situational modalities," and "scares tactics" -- specific design elements relating to point of view, environment, resources and so on established to generate fear effects (114-116).

Based on these identified formal properties, Perron proposes a "pyramid of scary video games" (118) -- a hierarchical ordering of games according to the centrality of their status as scary video games, based on the presence of the identified configurations of formal properties. At the bottom of the pyramid are games with "horror context," that use the iconographies or narrative tropes of horror without the presence of the formal properties that would lead to ludic fear effects. An intermediate level then accounts for games with "psychological fear," and "horror effects," in which such effects are present to some degree, but are not central to the game. At the apex of the pyramid, we find scary video games proper, defined as games featuring "fear as the game’s main object." It is this third category, Perron specifies, that constitutes his remit in this book.

With this first section having meticulously laid out the boundaries of Perron’s survey, the second section sees him proceeding to lay out the history of the genre, tracing the development of scary video games from 1981 to the time of writing -- or, to put it another way, from "Haunted House" (Atari 1982) on the Atari 2600 to "Resident Evil VII: biohazard" (Capcom 2017) on the PS VR.

Perron is careful to lay out the dangers of a teleological approach to historicizing: in other words, he cautions against looking at early horror games in particular as representing early steps towards the emergence of the characteristics and tropes that we now consider to be part and parcel of the genre, but which would not have been on the horizon at the time of the games’ release. Nonetheless, any attempt at laying out a history invariably necessitates some sort of structuring principle in order to shape proceedings into a comprehensible pattern -- and, by Perron’s own admission, it is virtually impossible to do this without slipping into teleology. Broadly speaking, the narrative the book finds within the history of videoludic horror is summed up in the subtitles to Chapters 5 and 6, which apportion this history into three eras -- "cluster," "crystallization" and "bipolarity." Perron spans the decade from 1981 to 1991, highlighting early examples of games -- such as 3D Monster Maze (Evans 1981), Ant Attack (White 1983) and Sweet Home (Capcom 1989) -- and focusing on their experiments with, and gradual formalization of, the techniques and effects of videoludic horror. "Crystallization," Perron then -- the point at which the formal characteristics and horror effects that gradually took shape during the initial cluster take the more rigid form of a recognizable genre -- covers the period from 1992 to 2005, and is equated specifically with survival horror (the period is bookended by "Alone in the Dark" (Infogrames 1992), the game that, thanks to its influence on "Resident Evil," has been retroactively identified as the inaugurator of the genre, and "Resident Evil 4" (Capcom 2005), generally considered to mark the end of the era of "classical" survival horror). Finally, "bipolarity" covers what might be called the post-survival horror era, which Perron argues has followed two distinct routes: the more action-oriented path that "Resident Evil 4" blazed ("fight"), or the run-and-hide approach represented by "Amnesia: The Dark Descent" ("fight")

Needless to say, this structure further entrenches survival horror as the core around which the book revolves, organizing the history of the genre in terms of before and after survival horror. This focus on survival horror is by no means absolute: even the "crystallization" section finds plenty of room for landmark games that do not fit the sub-genre label, such as "System Shock 2" (Irrational 1999), and the range and diversity of games that Perron analyses is nothing short of impressive. Moreover, throughout these chapters, as elsewhere in the book, Perron makes a convincing case for the primacy of survival horror.

The only problem, then, is that this focus inevitably sidelines other kinds of videoludic horror in the book’s presentation of the genre’s history. This is by no means a damning criticism: even with a book of this scope, selections have...
to be made, and any attempt at formally defining a genre is bound to slip into some degree of exclusionary essentialism. Perron is reflexively aware of the possible distortions inherent to the process of historicization. However, any reader with an interest in the genre is almost certainly going to be left questioning the omission of a favourite or other. To name just a couple: what about the horror adventure game Sanitarium (DreamForge Entertainment 1998)? What about the Thief games, in particular Deadly Shadows (ion Storm 2004), whose Shalebridge Cradle sequence has often been listed in the gaming press as one of, if not the, scariest videogame level ever (e.g. Gillen 2005)? The short answer, of course, is that, per the formalist definition of scary video games that Perron arrives at in Chapter 4, these games are not at the top of the pyramid: Sanitarium would probably belong at the base of the pyramid, while Deadly Shadows would occupy the second tier.

The four chapters of the book’s final section, then, see Perron venturing into purely formalist territory, analysing the formal qualities and patterns that define videogame horror. Chapters 7 and 8 focus, respectively, on the visual and the auditory. In frightening regimes of videogame horror. Together, the two chapters emphasize what Perron considers the key to the few effects that define scary videogames – namely, the player’s sense of presence in the gameworld, through her incorporation in the player-character as the protagonist of the horror scenario. Drawing equally upon game studies and film studies, Perron distinguishes between first- and third-person regimes of vision and audition, constructing an impressively eye- (and ear-) opening analysis of the ways in which configurations of sound and vision are used to situate the player in relation to the horrors the game sets out for her.

Chapter 9, then, turns to a consideration of the spaces of scary videogames. Starting with the observation that scary video games rely heavily on settings – a claim that no-one who has ever played a Silent Hill game can deny – Perron traces the indebtedness of scary videogame spaces to the Gothic tradition. Drawing upon work on spatiality and spatial topologies in game studies, the chapter then identifies the maze as the key topological structure of the scary videogame space. Perron’s analysis here is revelatory as he discusses the horror videogame maze in terms of its topographical features – the chapter offers fascinating insights into the function and significance of walls, doors and corridors. Throughout, the emphasis is as much on the experiential route through the space established for the player as it is on the properties of the space itself, with Perron lingering on the feelings of isolation and confinement that define the player’s experience of these spaces, building to the observation that the main goal remains to find an opening that permits one to escape the nightmare (328).

Finally, Chapter 10 addresses the two terms in the central opposition of horror: the monster on the one hand, and the protagonist (generally speaking, the player-character) on the other. Following Carroll and Robin Wood, Perron gives the monster pride of place in the signifying structure of horror, in that the encounter between the monster and the protagonist is key to establishing the pattern of figures under threat (369). Multiple significances of the monster are considered: from its simple function as an obstacle for the player to overcome, which Perron considers a domestication of the monster into a mundane entity (351), to the more existential threat that the monster represents as an entity that transgresses ontological and symbolic boundaries.

When it comes to considering the player-character, then, Perron bases his approach on the rich tradition of gender-based approaches to horror in film studies – as well as previous applications of this tradition to the study of horror videogames. Where the analysis of the monster is detailed and masterful, however, this section feels comparatively cursory. The conclusion that, despite the gender-coded presentation of protagonists that Perron lucidly breaks down and exemplifies, women and men come together in action (382) does not appear fully justified by the discussion leading up to it. Having considered the figure of the monster and the protagonist/Victim, the chapter concludes with a consideration of their face-to-face encounter, and the dynamics the encounter gives rise to – dynamics determined by the monstrous and the mortal threat it represents, requiring the player to overcome a player-character physical integrity (400). This demands a fight-or-flight, hunter-and-hunted response as the player-character attempts to survive the horror.

As should be amply evident from this hasty, whistle-stop overview, the analyses making up the book’s kaleidoscopic perspective add up to an impressive, multi-faceted and incisive study of the genre, that shines a revealing light into the dark corners of videogame horror. With a work of such breadth and scope, it seems more than a little unfair to look past the wealth of scholarship on offer in order to point out what has not been included. However, at one or two points, the lack of engagement with highly relevant existing work is felt. In Chapter 3, the assumption that, compared to the separation of film viewer from character, the ontological distance between the player and the character is reduced, to the point of giving the impression of disappearing (88) – though this is certainly qualified elsewhere in the book – rests upon a perhaps oversimplified conception of the relation between the player and the avatar or player-character. Relevant work by Rune Klevjer (2006; 2012) or Peter Bayliss (2007), for example, could have greatly enriched this discussion. Likewise, Olli Tapio Leino’s phenomenological account of emotion in games – which, at one point, specifically uses fear as a case study (2010, 36-48) – could
The otherwise astute analysis of the maze the definitive spatial structure of the vidoeulodic horror genre in Chapter 9 makes no mention of Gazzard's Mazes in Videogames (2013) -- surely the most comprehensive and in-depth work on the matter. Likewise, there is a significant amount of highly relevant work on monsters and monstrosity in videogames (for instance, Å velch 2013; Kocurek 2015) that could have further enriched the already impressive analysis Perron conducts in the final chapter. More specifically, when the figure of the zombie is tackled (357), Backe and Aarseth's work on the zombie tradition in videogames (2013) is missed.

These, however, are rare moments in a vast, dense and exhaustive book. Across its ten chapters and four hundred and twelve pages, The World of Scary Video Games can only be described as a tour de force, ranging over its domain with confidence, and eloquently -- with both evident passion and a sharp critical perspective -- communicating an exhaustive knowledge of videolodic horror. The historical survey of the genre it offers is encyclopaedic and wide-ranging, lucidly identifying the landmarks of the genre and the trends which have shaped it. Just as impressively, despite the minor caveats listed above, Perron's rigorous examination of the genre's formal structures and effects is insightful, surprising and often provocative, inviting new considerations of the senses, spaces and figures of horror in video games, and making an undeniable case for the fascination the genre continues to exert.

References


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11 Horrifying Video Games That Still Scare the Sh*t Out of Us. Whether they were intended to be or not, these games are haunted as all hell. By Dorian Grey, video games sometimes evoke an unsettling feeling of gazing through the looking glass. What lies on the other side? Well, in the case of a beloved GameBoy title like Pokemon Red, a creepy little place called Lavender Town, full of anything that conjures up different worlds can be scary. Like the static on the television screen in Poltergeist or the portrait of the eponymous Dorian Grey, video games sometimes evoke an unsettling feeling of